

Of Hume and Omnivores — A Contemporary Look at the Notion of Taste

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ABSTRACT. This paper centres on David Hume's *Of the Standard of Taste*, the well-known essay in which the Scottish philosopher tries to answer this tricky question: How can one explain that the judgment of taste prevails over the judgment of preference without calling on an argument of authority? Humean thought therefore contains the seeds of today's central elements: the awareness concerning the functioning of the discourse attempting to explain aesthetic experience, and sharper lucidity about the limits of this discourse. Hume rightly draws attention to the impact of using certain terms, and more specifically to that of the polysemy of vocabulary used to evaluate these works of art. The second part takes a more contemporary look at Humean theory and offers a reading of the classic essay using a notion developed in the sociology of art by R.A. Peterson, namely "cultural omnivorousness."

1. Introduction

In the 18th century, the notion of *rule* contributed to defining various fundamental concepts of the nascent discipline of aesthetics. The philosophers referring to this notion at the time were many, as were the various meanings ascribed to the term. Diderot, for instance, used the notion of rule to define genius (the ability to distance oneself from rules) as well as the expert (who knows how to apply rules). Kant for his part considered the ability to generate rules, which will be imitated by others, the mark of a genius. The notion later remained important, but often by occupying an opposite function: after the Romantic Movement, works were increasingly created with a view to transgressing established rules. This transgression was perceived as a sign of progress in artistic practice and would even become a prerequisite for an object to be considered a work of art.

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Today, to put it bluntly, the only actual rule in the artworld seems to be: “there are no rules”, either in creation or appreciation. In this context, is the concept of rule or aesthetic judgement useful at all? It would be reckless to even try to answer this very complex issue here. But I will attempt to show that in our context of aesthetic pluralism, Hume’s thoughts on the standard of taste can lead the path to “escape” aesthetic relativism, using a notion developed in the sociology of art by R. A. Peterson, “cultural omnivorousness”¹.

2. Taste in the 18th Century

The concept of rule plays a central role in David Hume’s famous essay *Of the Standard of Taste*, written ca. 1757. Taking for granted that it is only natural to seek a rule—a universal standard that might explain why tastes agree or disagree—the Scottish philosopher investigated its nature in this brief essay, which was destined to become a classic.

It should be recalled that the problem examined by Hume was more than a mere case study stemming from more general theoretical concerns (e.g. the epistemological reflection on judgment in which Hume was interested his entire life). It was also one of the many results of a debate that had left its mark on the previous century². A large part of the debate in fact carried on the very possibility of *revising* such rules;³ should one be content to imitate the Ancients, who had established the rules of art? Should a certain degree of freedom from the Ancients be permitted? At least, says Hume, the common verdict of experts (the “true judges”) can help us to separate the wheat from the chaff.

¹ This paper elaborates on certain elements presented earlier in a short text primarily treating analysis of the notion of mass art, titled “Cinéma indien et normes esthétiques : David Hume face au phénomène ‘Bollywood’,” *Rencontre avec l’Inde. Numéro spécial. L’Inde et le cinéma : champ et contrechamp* (Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 2009): 46-56.

² The elements presented by Hume in his essay are partially borrowed from French aesthetics—including the ideas of Batteux and Dubos, with which he was very much imbued (Motherstill, p. 429). If we re-examine the arguments cited in the quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns that had marked intellectual life in the previous decades, we see that the respective values of works were compared based on conformity to a standard, a rule of composition.

³ Luc Ferry, *Homo Aestheticus*, 38.

The idea of the very possibility of artistic progress at the heart of the dispute therefore relates to Hume's argument that it is not *the* rule of taste that should be sought, but rather that which *makes for constancy* in taste despite changes in morals and transformations in the art world over time. As a result, Hume conceives of rules of artistic production and evaluation as essentially changing, and deliberately provides few specific elements relative to what such a rule would contain. He therefore does not seek to fix the content of the rule or to give it a transcendental character, but rather to discover this content by learning to decode what is found in experience. In sum, the *existence* of the rule of taste is necessary, but its *content* remains contingent.⁴ Transformations in production and reception contexts result in a transformation of experience due to clashes between societies and periods, and this enables spectators to enrich and renew their understanding of works. History therefore plays an essential role in the constitution—even if provisional—of a series of prescriptions organizing production and reception. This is what is understood by the *test of time*.

It goes without saying that, positing as he does the existence of universal principles of taste while observing at the same time that the diversity of judgments between individuals is unavoidable, Hume diminishes his own room for maneuver. It seems all the more difficult to explain the regularity of the judgment of taste based on presuppositions seeking to be empirical when the facts themselves appear to be in contradiction, since compiling our judgments of taste is insufficient for finding a principle to unify them. Moreover, if the observation of the relativism of taste seems inescapable, such is also the case for the existence of a standard, a general tendency.⁵ How, then, can these two realities be reconciled?

First, this “relativism of principle” is subject to the requirement of agreeing with the standard of taste that is so sought after and in fact presupposed.⁶ As J. Wieand explains, Hume does not seek to *demonstrate* the existence of the norm: he conceives its existence as an obvious fact, and, even more importantly, concludes that the standard *must* exist by observing how we treat disagreements in judgment. The rule in question would

⁴ Peter Jones, “Hume, David. Survey of Thought” in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, edited by Michael Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998): 426-28.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 242-3.

thus be the much-vaunted key for resolving the disagreement, in short for determining who is right and wrong, and in what conditions.⁷ To put it otherwise, great diversity in tastes does not entail that tastes are all equal;⁸ that which distinguishes the judgment of taste from the feeling or sensation is, according to Hume, precisely that it can be either *correct* or *incorrect*:

Among a thousand different opinions which different men may entertain of the same subject, there is one, and but one, that is just and true⁹; and the only difficulty is to fix and ascertain it. On the contrary, a thousand different sentiments, excited by the same object, are all right: Because no sentiment represents what is really in the object.¹⁰

One of the difficulties consequently lies in the way to discriminate the one from the other, since aesthetic rules and our sentiments do not agree all the time. Difference of opinion on a given object is therefore normal, but this established fact in no way dispenses us from seeking the conditions under which we could attribute a measure of truth to the opinions in question. Only a select circle of individuals could, in Hume's view, distinguish between good and bad works: thus enter the famous expert, whose judgment serves as a model. To judge properly, the expert—as you all know—must be situated in an appropriate context, have the ability to compare, be endowed with common sense, be exempt from prejudices, be distinguished by sharpened senses, and have certain abilities including those related to the practice of an art. Hume therefore adopts a vision of artistic appreciation that has often been described as elitist¹¹ and notes himself—with reason—that such an approach raises questions that are, at the least, “embarrassing”.¹² Still, he trusts in this solution, and at first glance this

⁷ Jeffrey Wieand, “Hume's Two Standards of Taste,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 34, no. 35 (1984): 130.

⁸ Temperament and social context are the two principal elements that can influence an individual's taste. See Luc Ferry, *Homo Aestheticus*, 82.

⁹ I will try to demonstrate the opposite in the second part of this presentation.

¹⁰ Hume, *Of the standard of taste*, I.XXIII.8.

¹¹ Some commentators go so far as to say that there can be no good book independent of public social approval crowning its success, but this interpretation is not unanimously agreed upon. See Bouveresse, *Introduction*, 201–203.

¹² Hume, *Of the standard of taste*, I.XXIII.25

seems to be begging the question.

Objectivity in the judgment of taste in the Humean theory is ensured by three elements: language conventions, individuals' psychological constitution, and the possibility of sharing points of view in the public sphere.¹³ From this perspective works of art are pleasant means of communication, but correctly grasping their meaning is not done only through the five senses. It is also –mostly?– a question of interpretation and context.

3. The Standard of Taste Today and the Case of M. O

A certain constancy can still be seen today when it comes to taste: Does not *Romeo and Juliette* continue to move us in spite of the time and cultural barriers separating us from Shakespeare? Despite the variety of preferences, do we not have a tendency to recognize the existence of people whose taste is more discriminating than that of others? And yet, although the criteria established by Hume to recognize true experts can appear to belong to common sense, a problem arises when one adopts a more contemporary viewpoint. One can hardly criticize Hume for being unable to predict the future, but considering the extent to which his article is still today considered a major reference, one is compelled at the least to verify whether the Humean theory retains a relevance that goes beyond a strictly historical interest.

Can the notions advanced by the Scottish philosopher—for instance that of the expert—still shed light today?¹⁴ We will limit ourselves to noting that the proliferation of models of reference, the democratization of access to culture, and the autonomization of spheres of activity¹⁵ leave little room for a standard of taste as it appeared in the time of Hume. Interestingly, this negative observation can nonetheless enable us to reinterpret Hume in a different perspective.

¹³ Peter Jones, "Hume, David", 427.

¹⁴ To answer this question, it would of course be necessary to first ask ourselves whether there exists a standard of taste today and, if so, what elements define it. Following Hume, we will refrain from advancing a precise answer to this complex problem, as this is not the object of the present article.

¹⁵ See notably Yves Michaud, *L'art à l'état gazeux* (Paris: Stock, 2003), 204.

Let us take the case of M. O (“O” standing for “omnivorous”, “objec-tor” or “obtuse”, or “odd”, as you wish), who possesses all the qualities required, according to Hume, to be considered a “competent judge.” In-troduced to classical music at an early age, M. O learned to play a few instruments. Though he never became an accomplished musician, he is familiar with the basics of music theory and many works of the masters. In addition, competent individuals have noted his talent, good ear, and unquestionable aesthetic sensibility. He also pursues her artistic practice (today, through writing), has well-developed perceptive ability, can make subtle perceptual distinctions, and is able to set aside partial judgment and preferences. And yet—and this is where the problem of the contemporary use of the Humean theory arises—considering her cultural background, M. O’s taste does not lead him where it should. It appears our “man of taste” never listens to the classical music he has studied (he has learned why it is supposedly good, but fails to *enjoy* it), preferring instead primitive rock tunes or punk culture. He even takes a certain pleasure in watching rather mediocre television shows that hardly stand out as candidates to pass the test of time. Might he be suffering from a “taste disorder,” a problem of disposition of the organs disposition alluded to by Hume?¹⁶ Is he simply a trivial case of *akrasia*?

This does not appear to be the case, since M. O is indisputably able to see how the works of Puccini are “preferable” to those of Mancini, for example, and is able to leave aside personal preferences when assessing the value of a work as objectively as possible. He would not go so far as to say that the things which bring him greater aesthetic pleasure necessarily have some artistic value, especially since he knows full well that these two aspects are hardly equivalent in his cultural context.

At least at first glance, this calls into question the very relevance of the general notion of the expert, and not only for contemporary aesthetics: a rift between artistically valued objects and those that bring aesthetic pleasure might indicate the conventional nature of the very concept of taste. And yet, taste as Hume understands it must actively involve the perceptive abilities of the spectator—the true expert cannot settle for adopting one or another canon decreed by predecessors, or completely set aside what

¹⁶ Hume, *Of the standard of taste*, I.XXIII.8.

brings him or her aesthetic pleasure. What would Hume say about such a case? That M. O's preferences should be sufficient grounds to exclude him from the category of competent judge? This is impossible since, if he derives a certain aesthetic pleasure from mediocre works, this does not stop her from seeing the qualitative difference between various types of works.

The case of M. O can be explained using a contemporary notion which, at the same time, would more simply illustrate this "uniqueness in diversity" already observed by Hume in his own time. Considering that Hume is also seen as the father of the sociology of art,¹⁷ it may be appropriate to use a concept such as that developed by Richard Peterson. In the 1980s, this sociologist measured the diversification of behaviours regarding the consumption of cultural works, which he termed "cultural omnivorousness." Peterson's work originally aimed to respond to that of Pierre Bourdieu, who in the 1970s had attempted to demonstrate the link between social class and the legitimization of cultural practices. If Bourdieu's work is primarily a response to Kantian theory¹⁸, it also addresses the theses advanced by Hume, whose influence on Kant is well known.¹⁹ Bourdieu attempted to show that the standard of taste is decreed by the dominant social class,²⁰ the other classes being reduced to imitating this norm imposed from above. Would the situation be the same in other countries, more than 20 years later?

As soon as the 1990s, Peterson and his collaborators concluded that there no longer existed a cultural elite as keeper of cultural legitimacy and sustained by "elevated" works and these observations were later confirmed by studies in a number of countries. The standard of taste, Peterson ad-

¹⁷ Laurent Jaffro, "Transformation du concept d'esthétique," 51.

¹⁸ See Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction* (Paris: éditions de Minuit, 1979).

¹⁹ It goes without saying that theoretical reflection on the notion of taste and attempts to measure it through various empirical studies are two completely different things. But considering that empirical research is based on certain concepts used in theoretical reflection, we believe that although drawing a link between the two should be done carefully, it should not be ruled out.

²⁰ See Guy Bellavance, Michel Ratté et Myrille Valex, "Le goût des autres. Une analyse des répertoires culturels de nouvelles élites omnivores," *Sociologie et société* 36, no.1 (2004): 27-57. See also Richard A. Peterson and Roger M. Kern, "Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore," *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 5 (Oct., 1996): 900-907.

vanced, is no longer grammatically singular:

... even if the characteristics of intellectual snobbishness are based on a glorification of the arts and a disdain for popular entertainment, cultural capital increasingly appears as an aptitude to appreciate the different aesthetics of a vast range of varied cultural forms encompassing not only the arts, but also a variety of popular folkloric expressions.²¹ [understand here: “like M. O’s”]

Peterson notes that while omnivorousness can be observed in well-to-do classes, individuals belonging to less favoured groups instead practice univorousness, which consists in cultural practices limited to one category (for instance, listening only to country music or heavy metal).²² Peterson explains that omnivorousness “is a standard of good taste and, as such, has become popular,” and foresees a potential future decline, following the example of other norms.²³ Observing the emergence of this tendency to consume works of all kinds (works of the masses, popular works, the major classics, etc.), Peterson puts his finger on an element intuited by Hume: despite the fact that each period has its reference, a standard when it comes to good taste, we know that this standard will inevitably be replaced by another and that evaluation schemes are numerous and vary according to the context. The changing nature of the standard shows the importance of extra-aesthetic (and extra-artistic) factors in the appreciation of objects, and thus the limits of our ability to distinguish between elements we appreciate in a contingent way (according to social norms, etc.) and those central to “purely” aesthetic appreciation.

It is interesting to note that omnivorousness or the presence of eclectic taste is more widespread among people of higher status (Peterson 2004, p. 148), but it is not restricted to this category and could be explained by a “historical movement of growing tolerance for those with different values”.²⁴ Does this mean that omnivorousness contradicts the Humean

²¹ Richard A. Peterson, “Le passage à des goûts omnivores : notions, faits et perspectives,” *Sociologie et sociétés* 36, no. 1, (2004):146-147.

²² Peterson is nevertheless aware of the limits of this dichotomy and urges sound judgment when using such concepts.

²³ *Ibid.*, 149.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 152.

theory (e.g., that there is a standard of taste)? No. On the contrary, Peterson's analysis show why a person like M. O can exhibit such apparent inconsistency in his tastes, without this altogether leading us to discredit his judgment. In a word : Mr. O doesn't have bad taste ; he embodies the new standard, and by this I mean, aesthetic pluralism.

Ironically, Hume was fully aware that the diversity of tastes from one culture to another meant something: far from condemning us to aesthetic relativism, this observation enabled deeper reflection on this complex question. Population movements (geographically and in terms of social mobility) and new information distribution methods grant almost instantaneous access to extremely vast cultural variety as well as omnivorousness, a new way to establish mastery of cultural capital, so that it is no longer only the man of taste who indicates *the norm*, but rather *the norms*, depending on the context. Hence, one same individual can have many different ranges of taste, which nevertheless does not entail that "everything is the same"; it is the activity of comparison that enables one to develop the ability to discriminate, which is multiplied by the diversification of cultural offerings. Whether temporary or not, omnivorousness as observed by Peterson eloquently expresses what Hume tried to understand—the constant tension between conventions and individual preferences with which we find ourselves confronted when seeking to express our appreciation of an object.

4. Conclusion

I have tried to show here how in our context of growing aesthetic pluralism, Hume answer helps us to escape from the arbitrary and to overcome our esthetic disagreements. What are the rules underpinning and defining our judgment of taste? As we have seen, there are many possible answers to this question but, as Hume points out, even if "the general rules of art are founded only on experience and on the observation of the common sentiments of human nature, we must not imagine, that, on every occasion, the feelings of men will be conformable to these rules."²⁵ The Humean approach nevertheless offers a few avenues for reflection that al-

²⁵ Hume, *Of the standard of taste*, I.XXIII.II.

low us to bridge the classical conception of art and the defining traits of the contemporary art world.

Although opinions still differ greatly as to what should be understood by the term “standard of taste,” Hume will nonetheless have eloquently succeeded in following one of the principles he himself advanced: letting experience, rather than abstract principles, reveal to us our own nature. This nature is expressed as much through the diversity of our inclinations as by the certitude—whether we admit it or not—that we never feel *totally* wrong when we really like something, no matter how “bad” it is in the eye of somebody else²⁶.

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²⁶ Translated from the French by Joachim Lépine, whom we would like to thank for his wise suggestions. Original title: *Hume et les omnivores : regard contemporain sur la notion de goût*.

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